

Jerry Brown sends a message to water agencies on the Delta tunnels – and it's direct

By Dan Morain

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Jerry Brown took an Old English turn from his Latin wisdom in 2012 by declaring: “I want to get s--- done,” a reference to his vision for building two tunnels 30 miles long to move Sacramento River water south from the Delta to the rest of the state.

And in 2015, addressing California water agencies, he offered pithy advice to naysayers: “Until you put a million hours into it, shut up.” Critics of the \$15 billion project were greatly offended.

Now, with Brown’s tenure in the corner office ticking away, decision time is upon California. Yes, I have written that before. But in the coming days, the U.S. Interior Department is expected to issue its final assessment of the impact of the tunnels on the Delta’s ecology and associated fisheries.

In anticipation of that, Brown, through his top aide Nancy McFadden, very recently summoned representatives of the main consumers of Northern California water to Sacramento. The unmistakable message to come of the meetings: fish or cut bait, or some more pungent variation of that saying.

The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, Westlands Water District and the Kern County Water Agency, along with agencies in the Silicon Valley and East Bay, must decide if they’re in or out and whether they’ll pay their proportionate share.

Brown recently summoned MWD, Kern and Westlands water districts to Sacramento. The message? Fish or cut bait.

“The governor’s office has sent a very clear signal,” said Tom Birmingham, director of the 600,000-acre Westlands Water District, the second largest consumer after MWD. “The time to make a decision is now. The governor is absolutely correct. The welfare of the state of California is going to depend on the outcome of this decision.”

“We’re on the verge,” said Jeff Kightlinger, executive director of the Metropolitan Water District. The MWD board, like other the water boards, would need to decide whether to buy into the project, a step that would require a rate increases. “It may be expensive but it is needed.”

And this from Ted Page, president of the Kern County Water Agency board: “I sincerely believe that if we do not build it, the state will regret it. Personally, I am all in. I think California desperately needs this project.”

The federal wildlife agencies’ findings will signal the end of the planning process that began when Arnold Schwarzenegger was governor. It will set forth scientists’ view of the impact of the

tunnels on fish, and provide information about the amount of water that agencies could realistically expect to draw from the Delta.

Brown will travel to China this week, where he will advocate on behalf of cooperation in the fight against climate change. Internationally, Brown has been a leader on environmental issues.

He and his aides, many of them with a history of environmentalist advocacy, believe the tunnels will protect the environment while making the state water system more reliable. But green though he may be, the governor has been unable to persuade leaders of Delta counties of the wisdom of the tunnels.

“Two 40-foot diameter tunnels that can take the entirety of the Sacramento River at most times of the year of just seems like a bad idea to salmon fishermen,” said John McManus, executive director of the Golden Gate Salmon Association. “Rank-and-file salmon fishermen don’t trust them when they say, ‘Trust us.’”

There’s an element of hypocrisy on the part of Bay Area environmentalists, who drink water piped from Hetch Hetchy. Delta interests have all the water they could possibly want. But the fishing industry has a real beef. Dams deplete salmon runs.

Without a doubt, lawsuits will be filed to block the tunnels. No one should be shocked if there is an anti-tunnel initiative on the 2018 ballot, as happened in 2016 when Stockton farmer Dean Cortopassi promoted a measure to block the project’s financing.

Brown spent \$4 million to defeat the initiative. The next governor won’t be nearly as invested. Indeed, the leading Democratic candidates duck taking a stand one way or another on the tunnels. So San Joaquin Valley farming interests and the MWD face a decision. I’ll make up my mind after the final environmental assessments are issued.

But Californians have been re-engineering the Delta for more than a century. In time, nature will reassert itself. An earthquake will strike and levees will slump, inundating the man-made island and disrupting the balance between fresh and salt water. As sea level rises longer term, salt water will flow further inland. Sooner or later, something will give.

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